For Rural Idaho District, Innovation Comes Home-Grown and Local

With Plucky Ingenuity and Community Investment, Idaho's Snake River School District #52 Finds Creative Ways to Expand Science and Technology Curriculum

September 13, 2013 — When Mark Gabrylczyk took the helm of Snake River School District #52 in southeast Idaho in 2012, he had been away from education for five years working in the private sector. What he discovered on his return—an extremely tight budget—would prompt Gabrylczyk to think ourside the traditional K-12 box, apply resourcefulness acquired through his blended education and corporate experience, and enlist the help of local businesses. The district's resourcefulness has already yielded big results.

Same old habits will bring same old results

"Historically, the district has operated with very little budget," explains Gabrylczyk and, as a result, "the district hasn't had the money to do the things we'd like to do." As a teacher and principal for a decade before going to work as a national food service manager for Nonpareil Farms Corporation, the district's financial affairs had been someone else's headache. Now it was his. He learned that there had never been a tax referendum or supplemental levy in the district's history to increase funding for education. Instead, the district had made do for years on a meager 31 cents per student a year from property tax. Gabrylczyk managed to build support to pass a supplemental levy in early 2013. Without that influx of money, "it would have been a bloodbath around here with the job cuts." Now, he says, the district has "just enough to keep the doors open. But we're doing nothing extravagant."

In just a few months as superintendent, one thing had become abundantly clear to Gabrylczyk: "We can't keep doing the same things over and over again or we'll never get new investments." That's when Snake River started to get creative, finding low-cost ways to improve curriculum and entice the interest of taxpayers, donors and local businesses.

▲ A combine harvests the Snake River High School Crop Science's barley crop. The class raised barley and red potatoes, studying the effects of varying soil, fertilizer and water conditions in the process. Local farmers and a crop consultant donated the seed, machinery, lab work and expertise, while the students supplied the labor as they earned a science credit over the summer along with the satisfaction of a successful yield.

A fallow field becomes a collaborative hotbed

The district owns a parcel of land adjacent to Snake River High School in Blackfoot that it leases to a local father-and-son farming operation. Like most Idaho potato farmers, Garth and Dylan Van Orden grow russet

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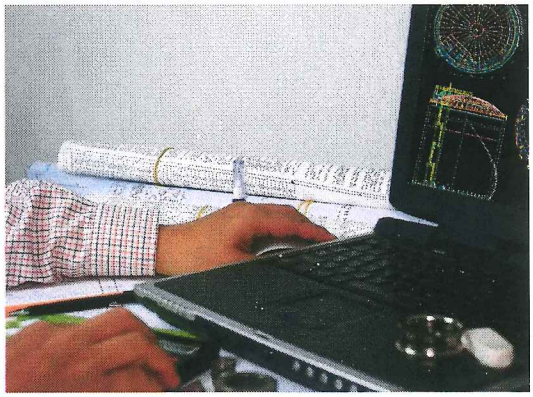
producing red potatoes. And hopefully, the district got a great start on increasing investment from local taxpayers, donors and businesses.

Next, district has designs on an engineering and drafting class

Beginning in the fall of 2013, Snake River added an industrial partnership to its agricultural one. Concerned about the technology and engineering options and rigor in his district's curriculum, Gabyrlcyzk decided to solicit help from two area-based businesses and neighboring Idaho State University to develop the district's first dual-credit engineering course. With a vested interest in nurturing young engineers and technologists in the local workforce, Basic American Foods and Premier Technology readily agreed to help underwrite the course. And thanks to a videoconferencing system at the high school, high-speed bandwidth crisscrossing the state and the statewide distance-learning cooperation between K-12 and higher learning, all courtesy of the IEN (Idaho Education Network, of which ENA is a partner provider), recruiting the participation of Idaho State University—located 25 miles south of Blackfoot in Pocatello—was easy as well.



▲ This year, Snake River High School is offering Drafting and Engineering I, a dual-credit course which will be taught via videoconferencing over the IEN by Idaho State University. The computers, other hardware and tuition for the top three students come courtesy of local industry.

In very short order, Snake River High School's Drafting and Engineering I course was drawn up and fabricated: Basic American awarded the district a grant with which to purchase the computers and other hardware the class required, Premier Technology will reimburse the tuition cost to the class's top three students as well as provide the three students paid internships in the summer of 2014, and ISU Geomatics and Civil Engineering Technology instructor Darren Leavitt will teach the course over videoconferencing (with high school students in Twin Falls, Boise and Meridian, along with ISU's own students, participating simultaneously as well).

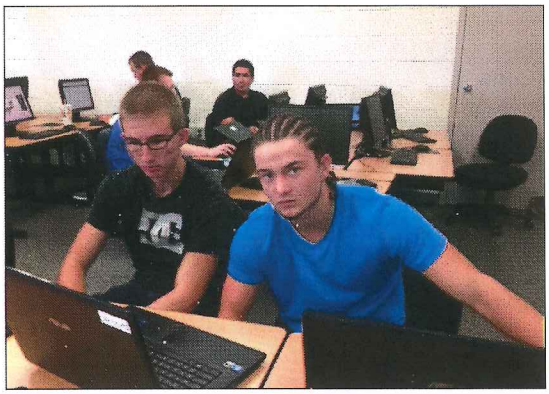
How a rural district meets the global economy

"Here's a rural school district that has buy-in from two major commercial enterprises, plus the involvement of ISU and ENA, all organizations very much involved in the global economy," says Gabrylczyk. "That's amazing. But that's what's possible when you can create partnerships that offer value to everyone involved."

He hopes this is just the beginning of many such successful partnerships in his district. "In the corporate world, you form partnerships with other people and organizations," he says. "Schools don't do a good job at that. I hope to change that here in Snake River." When he left education after ten years to try his hand in the private sector, Gabrylczyk characterized it has a huge gamble that turned out to be the best experience of his life. Now he's doing the unexpected again by striving to create partnerships such as the crop science and drafting and engineering courses. But based on their record thus far, it looks as though Gabrylczyk and the Snake River School District have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

potatoes. But they recently became interested in trying their hand at growing red potatoes too, and they approached the high school agriculture department with an idea: Would a high school class be interested in experimenting with red potato varieties over the summer break, testing different amounts of water and fertilizer, to find the ideal combination for the farmers?

The class could use a corner of the field that is out of the center-pivot irrigation's reach and is less than a mile from the school, plus the farmers would provide the seeds, water, plowing and barley harvesting. Gabrylczyk and his teachers jumped at the chance to offer a new science credit to their students. The Crop Science class was developed and 29 students on summer break showed up at 8 a.m. (and soon decided that wasn't early enough and changed the start time to 7 a.m.!) on the first day of class to get their hands dirty and flex their minds.



▲ Snake River High School juniors and seniors are taking Drafting and Engineering I, thanks to local investment and the videoconferencing. The dual-credit course is taught remotely by Idaho State University instructor Darrin Leavitt and all the hardware and some of the tuition has been covered by area businesses.

A good idea blossoms into a great idea

When the Crop Production Services office in nearby Rockford heard about the class, they too offered to help. Crop Consultant Leon Anderson would advise the class and provide all the sampling and testing free of charge. Besides helping out a local agriculture class, it was a perfect opportunity for him to introduce the students to the crop consultant career path. Fewer and fewer young people across the country are entering the agronomy field, despite the fact that a crop consultant like Anderson can earn a $100,000 salary.

"It's a great living," says Gabrylczyk, one that students with an interest in agriculture and science would do well to consider. "There are lots of opportunities for these kids to go into that field and farming," said Anderson. "Of course, from there it's everything from gridding to computers. You name it, it's there."

A little investment yields bountiful returns

So what did Snake River High School's Crop Science class yield?

- A healthy crop of science credits for the students. Twenty-two of the 29 enrolled passed the class. Says senior Dexton Lake, "With the new requirements for science and math, everybody is looking for another way to take another science class. Farming is a science, there's no doubt about it, and so the science credit is the incentive. And plus, it's a fun class."
- A whole lot of potatoes, barley and a sustainable, project-based addition to the district's science curriculum. The class sold the red potatoes and barley they harvested and the profits will be plowed back into next summer's class. "All we've got invested in this class is a $3,000 teacher's stipend," says Gabrylczyk. "Everything else was donated by the community." The class was so successful that next year enrollment could be larger, they'll grow a larger variety of crops, and the class could be conducted in collaboration with a local college or university over the IEN and videoconferencing, giving passing students a college credit.

▲ Like most Idaho potato farmers, Garth and Dylan Van Orden cultivate russet potatoes. When they decided to try their hands at red potatoes, the father-son duo turned to Snake River School District's high school agriculture department for help. The experiment quickly turned into a successful, project-based learning summer science class for the district.

- Community engagement and participation. Crop Production Services got some valuable visibility and public relations from their contributions to the class. The Van Ordens got some valuable data on

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